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Gorbachov, though willing to talk, provides no new solutions

Analysis

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MOSCOW — Mikhail S. Gorbachov made his first major foray last week into the heavily mined waters of arms control and Soviet-American relations. He displayed a refreshing willingness to debate the issues, but offered no new approach for breaking the deadlock.

For those who believe that dialogue is the key to resolving differences between the superpowers, Gorbachov certainly showed himself to be an improvement over his predecessors. But for those who hoped that a new, younger leader might have some fresh ideas to contribute, Gorbachov, 54, proved a disappointment.

He accepted President Reagan's invitation for a summit — time and place to be arranged later — and met for four hours with House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr. (D., Mass.) and other congressional leaders. He gave no ground but spoke eloquently of the need to end the "ice age" in Soviet-

American relations.

All to the good. But Gorbachov's one concrete gesture — a six-month freeze on the deployment of Soviet medium-range missiles in Europe — was as stale and unproductive an idea as could be imagined.

The freeze represents no sacrifice for the Soviets, as they already have more warheads aimed at Europe than there are targets. It was coupled with a call for a similar freeze in the deployment of American missiles in Western Europe, a demand that NATO has repeatedly rejected.

In his meeting with O'Neill on Wednesday, Gorbachov expressed dismay at the "absolutely incomprehensible haste" with which the Reagan administration dismissed his proposal as mere propaganda.

But, in fact, that is what it was — a proposal designed to be rejected. The real goals were to give the Soviets new material for trum-

peting their unparalleled interest in world peace, to put Reagan on the defensive and to apply pressure to the weakest links in the NATO alliance.

The prevailing view among diplomatic observers here was that Gorbachov's offer, made in a Pravda interview that was released April 7, was timed to coincide with the hurriedly arranged visit last week of the Netherlands' foreign minister, Hans van den Broek.

Of the five NATO countries that have agreed to accept deployments of 572 U.S.-made Pershing 2 and cruise missiles, the Dutch have been the most squeamish.

To placate a powerful opposition, the Dutch government announced in June that it would forgo deploying its share of 48 cruise missiles if the Soviets immediately froze deployments of their SS-20 missiles. The Dutch delayed a final decision until November, the month — and this seems hardly a coincidence — that Gorbachov's moratorium expires.

The Soviets continued to deploy

missiles after the Dutch challenge. According to Western intelligence, the Soviets have 414 of the fast, accurate missiles deployed in Europe and Asia (roughly two-thirds in Europe). Each has three warheads.

At their meeting Wednesday, Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko brought up the moratorium and told van den Broek that it was up to the Dutch to make a "responsible reaction" to the Soviet initiative. Van den Broek refused, saying Soviet missile levels were considerably higher than last June. At a news conference, he said he was disappointed with Gromyko's approach.

In the course of the week, other NATO allies rejected Gorbachov's proposal as well, and there was little evidence that they would face any public backlash.

The issue of Soviet superiority in medium-range missiles and NATO's desire to create a counterbalance (at this point, the Soviets still enjoy an 8-1 advantage in warheads) has been amply aired

in the last two years.

"They have squandered the man's first significant venture into high-stakes foreign policy," one Western diplomat remarked at the end of the week. "To have saddled this fresh young face with an old, unrealistic and patently cynical proposal was a gaffe."

But the deployment moratorium was not the only note that Gorbachov was singing last week.

In the same interview in which he announced the deployment, he also expressed his willingness to meet with Reagan. This represented a shift in the Soviet position. His predecessor, Konstantin U. Chernenko, had said last fall that conditions were not ripe for a summit.

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Two things have changed. Arms talks have resumed between the two superpowers, and the Soviets have chosen a new leader who seems more than capable of handling himself effectively in such a forum.

In the Pravda interview, Gorbachov referred to the Geneva arms negotiations as a "positive fact,"

but went on to bitterly denounce the American approach, particularly the Reagan administration's intention to pursue research on a space-based missile defense.

"They speak about defense, but prepare for attack," he said. "They advertise the space shield, but are forging a space sword. They promise to liquidate nuclear arms, but in practice build up these arms and perfect them. They promise the world stability, but in reality strive to wreck the nuclear balance."

House Minority Leader Robert H. Michel (R., Ill.), who took part in Wednesday's meeting, said Gorbachov seemed obsessed with the U.S. Strategic Defense Initiative, the space-based missile defensive research program known as Star Wars. Even when discussing human rights or trade issues, he would always come back to Star Wars.

At the same time, the congressmen were pleased by Gorbachov's insistence that the two countries are not doomed to eternal hostility, his belief that relations can and should improve.